USIA through the Experience of Eugene F. (Gene) Karst

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EUGENE F. (GENE) KARST

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KARST: Having been in an age pocket which prevented me from joining the Navy, the Army, or the Air Force I joined the Office of War Information in San Francisco just about Christmastime, 1942. There I wrote and later edited newscasts which could be heard throughout the Pacific area by friends or foes. At one point I wrote Americana material for translation into Malay. This was beamed to what later became Indonesia.

I remember, after writing one routine newscast, I went back to my apartment and listened to the announcer reading what I had written. At the end of the newscast, music came on the air, no bridge, no announcement of any kind. The music? Gershwin's “It Ain't Necessarily So.” I never found out whether it was intentional, or perhaps some studio producer making his idea of a joke.

Later I transferred to another section of the OWI, the news office. There we processed news material intended for use by newspapers in the Pacific area. I was in this section when Franklin Roosevelt died and I prepared special materials about his unexpected death. A short time later, Truman made his first speech to the American people and for

other nations. The wire copy coming off the teletype machines showed an exclamation point after EVERY sentence. I believe somebody in the White House had done this so that when the President read the speech over the radio, he would not drop his voice at the end of each sentence. Truman never claimed to be a great orator.After VJ Day, we continued our work, though the OWI went through several bureaucratic changes, finally winding up in the State Department. When the San Francisco office closed, about mid-summer 1946, I was transferred to Washington to become the first editor of the Far East Wireless File.

Before then, the State Department had sent a short, informal batch of material of general interest to those serving overseas at various embassies, an occasional editorial of interest, perhaps an article about foreign affairs or whatever. It was not done by a news person and had no special value in presenting the United States message to the world.

When the OWI and the Coordinator of Interamerican Affairs office disappeared after the end of the war, the need to present America's message to the world was recognized. A general news office was set up for dissemination throughout the world, but there was a need for specialized area coverage, so one section devoted itself to matters of interest in Europe and the Middle East. I was given the responsibility for supervising about two or three hours daily to be sent to the Far East.

You may recall that General MacArthur had his own ideas about Far Eastern affairs, often different from Truman's, which finally resulted in Truman firing MacArthur. But before this came about, I became involved in an incident where we were accused of deliberately editing out a key sentence of a MacArthur statement which ran about 2,000 words. By then we had an office in Shanghai and elsewhere. The U. S. Information Office in Shanghai put my 600-word story out to newspapers and radio stations. A very strong statement by MacArthur, one sentence, was NOT included. So the United Press and the Scripps-Howard news services accused the State Department of trying to kill a key part of the MacArthur statement. Naturally, I was called on the carpet.

I had worked for the government for so many years by then that I knew my job was to handle newswriting without any personal views of my own. I KNEW I had NOT tried to distort MacArthur's message. So I trotted out my original typewritten story which included the statement in question. The “wire room” included several teletype machines for incoming and outgoing material. The State Department had a contract with an independent, private company called “Press Wireless.” It owned the teletype machine handing all of the Far Eastern Wireless File material. It was their job to send my material to San Francisco by land line. There the Press Wireless people eventually put the material into Morse code and transmitted it to all points in the Far East, including Shanghai, Tokyo, Hong Kong and wherever. But, in Manila it had an office where all this material was received and re-transmitted after editing it for garbles or mistakes. The villain was tracked down to their Manila office. It seemed probable that a clerk, possibly one who could follow letter-by-letter material without knowing any English, was the one responsible.

I was exonerated because I showed my superiors the original story I wrote and also was able to show them the teletype tape which included the key sentence. So it was a case of probably an innocent error by the employee of a private company, and certainly nobody employed by the State Department.

When this was explained to the United Press and Scripps-Howard people in Washington, DC, the next day the papers carried something like this: “The State Department admitted it had left out a key sentence in the controversial MacArthur statement. It blamed the error on a clerk's mistake.” No mention whatever that the clerk was hired by the private company, and was NOT anybody in the State Department.

When the Marshall Plan came into existence, I was transferred from the Far East Wireless File editing to a new European Regional File. We were to concentrate on Marshall Plan material, a file of two or three hours daily, intended for European newspapers and radio stations.

I used to go to work early, about 7 a. m., because our file began about 11 a.m. A sidelight as I went to work at our office at Eighteenth and Pennsylvania Avenues was the fact that several times I saw Harry Truman, the President, briskly walking back down toward the White House, accompanied by several Secret Service men, after his daily constitutional trek out to Georgetown.

One facet regarding the setting up of the European Regional File was our dealings with the Civil Service Commission. We were to have a staff of about 16 or 17 people. In order to get final approval, we had to take on about a dozen people who were not experienced in handling news or writing, so that we could get three really bright young people. Two of them were young women just out of college, Mary Johnston and Urmila Devgon. The third experienced person was a man who wrote magazine articles but was rather inept when he tried to handle news material about the Marshall Plan.

One sidelight: many of the basic contracts which we were to process into news items included a statement along these lines: “Ninety percent of the money for agricultural machines (or other materials) is to be spent in the United States,” then to be turned over to various European farmers, etc. So, the Marshall Plan not only helped save Europe from communism, but it often was an indirect, unpublicized subsidy to American business!

My next assignment was as information officer at the embassy in Manila. At the time the newspapers there, and American newspapers also, were constantly carrying stories about “graft and corruption” in the Filipino bureaucracy. Finally, the Foreign Office of the Philippine government asked the American ambassador to discuss the problem. As information officer, the ambassador took me and two or three other embassy people down to see Carlos Romulo, Foreign Minister.

Romulo complained about articles which had appeared in The New York Times, The Readers Digest and other periodicals and wanted us to “do something about it.” I finally told Romulo that we could do absolutely nothing—that if we tried to tell any American

newsman what to write or not write about, it would only make the matters worse—we would be accused of censorship, of trying to hide the truth, to deceive their readers. I suggested that if anyone could do anything about the situation it would be somebody like Romulo himself, a Filipino. He had traveled widely in the United States and was generally well respected.

Next assignment: the embassy in Buenos Aires. Juan Domingo Peron was in power, aided by Evita. They were carrying on a small but continuing anti-American campaign. They had forbidden the newspapers and radio stations to accept or use any USIS material (There was no TV then.). We had phonograph records of American music to offer the radio stations, and of course we had daily news material coming to us every day. So, what does a press officer do when his hands are tied?

We came up with the idea of a monthly magazine, appealing to the public, but sold on Argentine newsstands. We came about this idea shortly after my arrival in Argentina in November, 1950. The public affairs officer, my superior, and I attended embassy staff meetings every week. Before long, I told the embassy officers about our plan to publish a magazine which would sell for a modest amount, trying to get our message out about U.S. policies, culture, and background.

Meanwhile, I was asking the State Department for special material, letting them know our intentions for using this material—photos, etc. The embassy at the time was headed by a charge d'affaires; we had no ambassador. The charge d'affaires, Lester DeWitt Mallory, was not sympathetic to the USIS branch of the embassy. Personally, I believe there was jealousy among him and the other “old line” Foreign Service people who regarded USIS as a new, upstart organization. We had our separate work. We happened at the time to have a generous “representation allowance.” This enabled us to entertain Argentine officials without having to dig into our own pockets. We had our own budget, separate from the budget of the other parts of the embassy. Their hidden hostility was quiet because of our

distinguished public affairs officer, my superior. He had been Minister to Bolivia, Minister to Portugal, and before that, Dean of the Rice University in Houston.

Our magazine, Informaciones, appeared for the first time on February 1. I sent copies to each of the embassy officers. In the staff meeting, I asked for comment and suggestions on how we could improve on the content of the magazine. I got no reaction, no response. Next issue, March 1, shortly after then the PAO took off on home leave. His ship was hardly out of the harbor when the administrative section of the embassy began to throw obstacles in the path of Informaciones. Did I have permission of the State Department to publish a magazine? What were we doing with all the money received from the sale of the magazine? And other questions of the kind.

I assured them that there was plenty of precedent for a USIS magazine being published in other posts. We had received up to then only a small part of the money from the sales, and every penny could be accounted for. I had deliberately NOT asked for permission, believing my request would bring about a delay, but saying I thought the Department already had tacitly approved of the plan by sending us photos and other materials for use in the new magazine.

So it went, problems with the administration people until we had a new ambassador, Ellsworth Bunker. A few days after his arrival, I was called to his office. There he read a warm commendation for the magazine from the Director General of the Foreign Service. It said that Informaciones was doing fine work in presenting the truth about the United States and what it stood for. A copy was entered in my personnel files. A few months later, I received a promotion.

North Korea invaded South Korea in June, 1950. Almost a year later, the Peronista newspapers began asserting that the United States had provoked the war in Korea. How to refute this? We took copies of the headlines and articles in the Peronista newspapers

and had them reproduced in Informaciones without comments. However, we did recall that the North Korean invasion would be remembered like Pearl Harbor as a day of infamy.

Of course, Informaciones tried to refute communist propaganda. In refuting communist distortions about the United States, we were also refuting some of the Peronista lies about the United States. We could not call the Argentine press liars, but we could show the lies put out by the communists. Otherwise, we could have been put out of business by the Argentine government. After all, Informaciones was openly published by a part of the United States embassy.

We started with 5,000 copies for the first edition published. Later, we printed up to 50,000 copies for distribution and sale before Peron was overthrown. A file for the first two years of the magazine was given to the St. Louis University Library, St. Louis, Missouri, if any researcher wishes to see Informaciones. In it we tried to show the cultural links between Argentines and Americans and to reflect American ideas and American life.

Back in Washington, I had a tour of duty in the Special Events section of the Voice of America. One day we received a tip from the Russian Desk of the State Department. The Soviet Union had sent a delegation of Russian farmers to the United States, visiting Iowa and other agricultural areas. Now they were back in Washington before heading home.

Some months earlier, Leonard Marks, chief of USIA, in response to a query, said that the Voice of America would freely broadcast the views of Russians and others in any discussion of communism versus the American views on world affairs. Meanwhile, the USSR was consistently jamming Voice programs in Russian, beamed at Russia.

Somebody in the Russian embassy recalled Marks' statement and phoned the State Department asking whether the Voice of America would broadcast the views, uncensored, of the Russian farm group. The State Department phoned USIA and soon I received

instructions to get tape recording equipment over to the Russian embassy for the interviews. So, off we went, I as producer and another man with the recording equipment.

The Russian farm group voiced their views freely, in Russian, which I did not speak. Later it was broadcast, uncut, in our program beamed at the Soviet Union. Interestingly, the whole program was jammed as usual, including all the remarks by the Russian farm group.

A sidelight of all this was the fact that I, and the man who recorded the Russians, were the first American government employees below the ambassadorial level ever to step inside the Russian embassy on Sixteenth Street in Washington.

My next assignment was to El Salvador, where I became public affairs officer. My first job there was to record the Salvadoran symphony orchestra presentation of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony so that it could be re-broadcast on Voice of America programs, thus complimenting El Salvador's appreciation of classical music. We had excellent relations with the newspapers in El Salvador, who used a lot of USIS materials. This was some years before there were serious social problems that broke out into bloody revolt.

The second-largest city in El Salvador is Santa Ana, center of the coffee-growing area. Santa Ana, California, was in the citrus-growing area of its state, and it occurred to me these two cities would be suitable for a sister-sister relationship in the People-to-People project being fostered by the Eisenhower Administration. So, after home leave in the U.S., I stopped in the California city, got acquainted with the chairman of the local group.

A few weeks later, Ed Armstrong, a Santa Ana, California lawyer, and enthusiast as well as chairman, wrote to me, saying he wanted to bring his wife and a movie camera, to visit the Salvadoran city, to spend a couple of weeks. So, we got down to specifics. I visited the mayor of Santa Ana, El Salvador, as well as the governor of the province to see how much they were interested in the project.

About a week later, I was invited back for a meeting of civic leaders. I found that they had set up a big program for the Armstrong visit. They were to meet with civic groups, clubs of lawyers, accountants, and labor unions. They were to visit schools, hospitals, and coffee fincas. There were luncheons, dances, dinners, and social visits all set up. And when the time came, everything went smoothly. I had a cocktail party for about 100 Salvadoran dignitaries the night of their arrival. When the Armstrongs went to Santa Ana the next day, they were met at the city limits and presented with the key to the city, then escorted to the Cathedral where the Bishop offered a Te Deum ceremony for the movement. And during the week a parade featuring the two Santa Anas marched through the city. Newspapers and radio carried great quantities of news about the Armstrong visit.

Finally, the President of El Salvador requested the Armstrongs to visit him at the Presidential Palace. The warm reception for the Armstrongs resulted in numerous personal contacts between official and non-official Americans with their Salvadoran counterparts, fostering a tremendous amount of mutual understanding.

Some months later, the mayor of Santa Ana, El Salvador and his wife, were invited to Santa Ana, California with several gatherings similar to those in the coffee growing area. Their visit was climaxed when the visiting mayor and his wife took part in the famed Rose Bowl Parade in Pasadena.

Two years as Deputy PAO for Brazil were generally pleasant but not unique. The PAO was absent when a big Congressional delegation came to town, wanting to check up on the activities of USIA and of the USAID program. I made a general presentation, followed by more detailed reports from the cultural officer, the film and motion picture officer, and other staffers. We answered questions from the likes of Senator Margaret Chase Smith and other senators and representatives. But when Senator McClellan of Arkansas got the chief of the USAID program to testify, he asked a loaded question, one which would be difficult or impossible to answer. The chief of the AID program turned beet red, and

struggled to reply. The Senator, I believe, had it in for the AID program and wanted to make headlines and political capital back home.

Which reminds me of an experience I had in Buenos Aires when I was information officer there some years previously. A big congressional delegation came to town. Argentine as well as American embassy officials were all out at the airport to greet them. After 10 minutes or so, a member of the delegation came to me and asked me to request that the photographers leave the airport. Remember, these were Argentine news photographers and I, as a member of the American embassy, really was a guest in the country.

It was a completely ridiculous request that I, a foreigner, in Argentina, should ask the local photographers to leave. The answer to the whole thing was that still on the plane waiting to disembark were seven or eight wives of the delegation, all traveling on an American military plane. What they feared was that some newsman might tell about the wives getting a free tour of South America and the story would get back to their home town newspapers or perhaps in Drew Pearson's column.

After Rio, my next job was in Washington as chief of the Latin American Division of the Voice of America, with nine hours of Spanish broadcasting daily plus four hours in Portuguese. We had a staff of 60, plus some programming coming from contract people. Three weeks after I reported for duty, in the words of one of my superiors in the Voice, “All Hell broke loose.” It was the Cuban Missile crisis. Immediately, we went to 24 hours a day in Spanish, and greatly expanded our Portuguese broadcasting. We borrowed personnel from other parts of the VOA and called some of our contract people to work extra.

At that time, Ed Murrow was head of USIA. After the critical period ended about three weeks later we learned that Murrow wanted to commend our division for the excellent work we had come up with. We knew he was the big boss but we had not seen him personally. His office was at Eighteenth Street and Pennsylvania Avenue. Our headquarters were down near the Capitol, at Third and Independence. Finally, Murrow said he wanted to

come to the Latin American offices and studios so he could congratulate each person individually. With our busy schedule with programs on the air, I took him around and introduced him to each person working at the time. We had people from many different countries—Argentines, Chileans, Cubans, Mexicans, one Hungarian, a Lithuanian who became an American citizen, and perhaps two or three others.

A quiet person, at the end of the tour, Murrow paid what I regarded a compliment. He said, “You know the names of all your people.” Yes, I also knew them by their first names, like Vytautas, Hamid, Pedro, Fernando, Pepe, and Virginia.

Later, there was a public ceremony in the auditorium presenting me with an award for the entire division. And before long, I received a promotion, personally okayed by Ed Murrow.

Our division later faced a similar crisis, as did all other parts of the VOA, when President Kennedy was assassinated. Again we were on the air 24 hours a day in Spanish for a while, and expanded our Portuguese air time.

Before I became connected with government work, I had met some distinguished people for at least a few minutes, so I could have a personal opinion of them rather than just seeing them in newsreels or on television. I had met Senator Harry Truman and had attended one of his press conferences. I had attended a news conference of President Kennedy. Quite by chance I had spent about 45 minutes with Frank Lloyd Wright. When I was in Special Events in the VOA, I had met Vice President Richard Nixon at least twice. Also, I had met Vernon Walters, Milton Eisenhower, and a couple of Central American presidents.

Now, with Lyndon Johnson as President, I wanted my own personal assessment of him. As chief of the Latin American division, I could decide who might “cover” various assignments. Johnson decided to invite the Latin American ambassadors resident in Washington to the White House for an informal get-acquainted session. Here was my

chance. So I and an engineer made arrangements to record the gathering at the White House.

LBJ stumbled through a brief written talk of about five minutes in length, welcoming the visitors. Then, so help me, he said, “Gentlemen, let's all go into the East Room and we'll have a cup of tea.” Remember that coffee is the principal crop and money-maker for countries like Colombia, Guatemala, El Salvador, Costa Rica, and Ecuador. It is a vital force in the economy of countries like Brazil, Mexico, and possibly one or two others.

I was shocked. I was not close enough to the group to see or hear any reaction on the part of the ambassadors. How could the President of the United States make such a gaffe? Was it thoughtless? Or could it be intentional, his idea of a Texas joke? Back at the office, I was soon involved in other matters and forgot the incident. But, through the years, I have wondered. Since then I have read great quantities of biographical material on Lyndon Johnson and as of 1999 I am inclined to believe that it was his idea of a joke, probably a clumsy but certainly undiplomatic bit of humor.

My final overseas assignment was Asuncion, Paraguay. There I had a chance to meet the President, also regarded as the dictator, Stroessner. Shortly after arrival, I was invited to go with him and several cabinet members and other officials to fly in Cessnas to the interior of the country for city hall dedications, graduations, and similar events. I believe I was included in the trip because Stroessner wanted to make his own assessment of me, the new PAO. Our conversation was brief but pleasant.

There was one special aspect to seeing the President of Paraguay, which is generally a tropical country. On the day before New Year's, I was told that all embassy officers were to greet the President at noon on New Year's Day and we were to wear white linen suits, I had been in the country just a few weeks and did not own a white linen suit. So, on December 31, I was going from store to store trying to find a white linen suit. I was taller than the average Paraguayan and perhaps a bit broader in the middle so my search was

in vain. Finally, I was able to borrow pants and a jacket from the brother-in-law of a USIS employee but it still was too small. I am sure that Stroessner observed me with an ill- fitting white linen suit as I shook hands with him.

As the following New Year's Day approached, I bought a white linen suit from an embassy officer who was leaving Paraguay so I would be ready for the presidential reception. But a few days before New Year's the word came from the Paraguayan protocol office that white linen suits no longer would be the required costume for the reception. Though I was out of style when wearing it later occasionally, the white linen suit, which fitted me perfectly, was comfortable on those very warm tropical days.

Back in the United States after my tour of duty in Asuncion, I had a final assignment in the Public Affairs Office of the Voice of America—then retirement. A fascinating, interesting 27 years in USIA and its predecessors. Ups and downs, little problems and big ones. But I and my family loved it.

Now, at age 93, I live in St. Louis with one of my daughters in case any researcher wants further details about how I was involved in those 27 years.

End of interview